

Cervantes' Epic Novel: Empire, Religion, and the Dream Life of Heroes in Persiles [Review]

By: [Ignacio Lopez Alemany](#)

Michael Armstrong-Roche's, *Cervantes' Epic Novel: Empire, Religion, and the Dream Life of Heroes in Persiles* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 2009). In *Seventeenth-Century News* 68.1-2 (2010): 39-42.

Made available courtesy of Seventeenth-Century News: <http://www.english.tamu.edu/scn/>

*****© Seventeenth-Century News. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Seventeenth-Century News. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

Michael Armstrong-Roche quite correctly points out that most critics view *The Labors of Persiles and Sigismunda* as a “turning away from modernity” (3), an example of Cervantes’ late-life embrace of the Counter-Reformation. Some even consider the byzantine novel a misstep by the author of *Don Quixote* while, ironically, Cervantes himself saw his last book as his crowning achievement. In this perceptive monograph, Armstrong-Roche makes the case that *Persiles* can best be appreciated if, instead of looking forward toward the novel, we look back to the epic.

Keywords: Michael Armstrong-Roche | The Labors of Persiles and Sigismunda | Miguel de Cervantes | Book review

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

meticulously introduced, edited and footnoted letter. This book does more than merely illuminate a previously obscure life; this work also provides an useful primary resource for early American studies. The uncommonly lavish layout of this handsome volume aptly suits the editors' exemplary dedication to and execution of their editorial undertaking—a model of its kind.

Michael Armstrong-Roche. *Cervantes' Epic Novel: Empire, Religion, and the Dream Life of Heroes in Persiles*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Xiv + 406 pp. \$70.00. Review by IGNACIO LÓPEZ ALEMANY, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, GREENSBORO.

Michael Armstrong-Roche quite correctly points out that most critics view *The Labors of Persiles and Sigismunda* as a “turning away from modernity” (3), an example of Cervantes' late-life embrace of the Counter-Reformation. Some even consider the byzantine novel a misstep by the author of *Don Quixote* while, ironically, Cervantes himself saw his last book as his crowning achievement. In this perceptive monograph, Armstrong-Roche makes the case that *Persiles* can best be appreciated if, instead of looking forward toward the novel, we look back to the epic. Seen from this viewpoint, Cervantes' last work summarizes and reinvigorates the epic trajectory by inverting its premise. The author argues that the strong focus on love in Cervantes' last work does not distract from the protagonists' epic duty, but rather constitutes the main plot of the heroic adventure of *Persiles and Sigismunda*.

The carefully crafted monograph centers on four themes—empire, religion, love and politics—each of which is studied in its own chapter following a structure that is clearly laid out in the book's introduction. First we are presented with a characterization of verse and/or prose epic handling one of the four themes; then the author engages *Persiles* in the discussion. The argument, therefore, takes the epic frame as a point of departure to study each particular theme, but does not limit its claims to the genre. Each chapter also explores analytical paradigms that have emerged from a perception of historically significant and recurring features of Cervantes' text around keywords

such as “barbarism” in Chapter One, “charity” in Chapter Two, and “sensuality” in Chapter Three. In this analysis Armstrong-Roche demonstrates that the novel becomes a kind of parable for debates touching on themes including the legitimacy of conquest, religious reform, the honor code, the concept of matrimony and prerogatives and duties of rulers.

Chapter One, “Europe as Barbaric New World,” studies the relation between the Barbaric Isle—where the action of the novel begins—and the Catholic South, as one to be understood in terms of the difference between law and custom. Armstrong-Roche points out the importance of Cervantes’ departure from the traditional practice of epic writers who worked to “align the hero’s ethnic, political and religious affiliations with those of its first audiences and readers” (36). By doing so, and having northern European Gothic protagonists make their way across Latin Europe, Cervantes is able to showcase the known from an outsider point of view and, consequently, unsettle his first readers’ cultural assumptions. This works particularly well when we see that, while it is true that the Barbaric Law of the Island features consumption of hearts, sacrifices, trafficking of women, and other seemingly barbaric practices, the Catholic and civilized world has its own forms of barbarism present in numerous customs ranging from the idolatry of female beauty to the violent consequences of the honor code. The final destiny of the pilgrimage of our protagonists is then no longer the geographical city of Rome, but a conjugal and charitable love discovered precisely through the encounter of “humanity on the margins and barbarism in the heartlands of Christianity” (119).

The second chapter, “Christian Spirituality: The Law of Love,” relates Cervantes’ work to Greek adventure novels which enjoyed great literary and religious prestige in early modern Europe, and had been previously Christianized and naturalized in Spain by Lope de Vega in *El peregrino en su patria* (*The Pilgrim in His Homeland*, 1604). In Lope de Vega’s work, as in Vergil’s *Aeneid* and Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, religion is not a problem to be explored, but a fact of life, or a duty. Armstrong-Roche argues that “religion in *Persiles* is seen as more of a problem and a question” (115) and that the protagonists’ story can be read as a “journey of discovery about what it means to be Catholic” (120). And that meaning is not to be found in an orthodox Southern

Catholicism that is continuously questioned throughout the novel or in Protestantism, as some recent critics have argued. In fact, the book makes the case that being a Catholic is most fully understood when considered in light of a Pauline sensibility that can be traced thematically and structurally in certain parallels between Saint Paul's voyage from Cesarea to Rome and aspects of the ancient Greek novel such as storms, shipwrecks, mutiny and eastern Mediterranean geography (124) and, most notably, in the importance of *caritas* over the institutional forms of religion, and the spirit over the law.

Chapter Three, "Epic Recast: The Dream Life of the New Hero," analyzes Cervantes' reconciliation of the epic antagonism between war, as the natural occupation of the epic hero, and love, usually subordinated to conquest and considered a distraction from the hero's duty. The chapter studies passages from *The Aeneid* and *The Odyssey*, as well as Periandro's dream episode in which he is tempted by *Sensualidad*. The protagonist recounts this dream and his choosing of *Castidad* over *Sensualidad* as one of his heroic deeds, although Chastity is not presented as "an absolute or permanent value" (191). In fact, explains Armstrong-Roche, "Periandro's quest is erotic, and Rome for him is not a martial or even primarily Christian destiny, but a marital one. The opposition is not only between war and love, but also between immediate and deferred sexual gratifications" (198). This reading seems to be attuned with contemporary reaffirmations of matrimony across confessional lines and effectively redefines the role of the epic hero.

The fourth and last chapter, "Christian Politics: Church and State," examines a number of episodes of the novel that Armstrong-Roche argues can be considered "a picture of the ritual initiation and education of princes, the experiences they should undergo, the knowledge (both natural and revealed) they should master, and the values they must come to uphold" (205). The first of these lessons can be found in the adventure on Policarpo's Isle, used as a model of the tensions between Christian ideals and political debates of the time. Policarpo has been elected king of his island because he is considered the most virtuous of all the island's men and should rule until his passing or his character fails. In this episode, however, Policarpo and his daughter fall in love with the protagonists of this story, Auristela and Periandro, and

scheme together with a sorceress to hold them captive. The episode's outcome shows us that what seems to be a kingdom of virtue with respect for the law has, in fact, much in common with the Barbaric Isle. The chapter also dedicates attention to the tensions between Church and nobility regarding their different models of matrimony after the Council of Trent. In the realm of the real-world Christian politics, this chapter offers a very perceptive analysis of the *morisco* Jarife's speeches in conjunction with the expulsion of the *moriscos* that is presented prophetically when our pilgrims pass through a village in Valencia, a topic that was very much in the mind of the contemporary readers of Cervantes' work.

The book continues with an epilogue entitled "Cervantes' Human and Divine Comedy" that should not be overlooked as it sketches out broader implications of Armstrong-Roche's analysis dealing with Cervantes as an author, and the historical and cultural reality in which he lived. The book closes with a documented appendix on the composition dates of *Persiles*.

Michael Armstrong-Roche's book is an example of an expertly written, well-documented, and theoretically informed study that is attentive to the cultural context in which the object of his analysis was produced. His monograph is not necessary reading for all *cervantistas*, but it is easy to predict that it will become as essential as the important studies written by Alban Forcione, Diana de Armas Wilson, and Isabel Lozano Renieblas when seeking to understand *The Labors of Persiles and Sigismunda*.

Charles Fantazzi. *A Companion to Juan Luis Vives*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008. viii + 430 pp. \$185.00. Review by ELIZABETH R. WRIGHT, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA.

This volume offers detailed analysis and rigorous contextualization of the diverse writings of Juan Luis Vives (Valencia, Spain 1492/93—Bruges, Belgium, 1540). In the course of some sixty different publications, this Valencian humanist considered the education of women, family relations, poor relief, religious conflict, formal rhetoric and royal power. During his five sojourns at the court of Henry VIII